

WORSHIP AT HOME – 7TH MARCH 2021 – LENT THREE

Dear Friends,

The churches are beginning to open again in the near future – another step back to ‘normality’! What a blessing it is that we shall gradually now be able to worship together in person [though we aim to keep Worship at Home going for as long as possible for not everyone will be able to attend in person each Sunday]. This week the subject matter is one of the difficult parts of faith – wondering why bad things happen to good people. And we hear Jesus’ response. I hope you all keep well and safe. God bless.

Margaret

Call to Worship: Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

Lord our God, we thirst for your ways. We do not naturally think like you, and our behaviour is not always what you desire, but we long to forsake our mistaken ideas and ways so that we may return to you for your abundant pardon. Speak to us today – help us to listen carefully – and renew us as your pilgrim people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

And a prayer of approach, a collect for purity – based on Hebrews 4:12-16

Almighty God, who sees the secret places of our hearts, discerns our thoughts and intentions, and from whom nothing in all creation is hidden, draw us to your throne of grace, that we may receive mercy by your Son, our great High Priest, and be strengthened by your Spirit in our inner being; through the precious name of Jesus Christ. **Amen**

The words to ‘O for a thousand tongues’ written by Charles Wesley [1707-1788]. Singing the Faith 364

1 O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise,

The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!

2 My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim,

To spread through all the earth abroad the honours of your name.

3 Jesus – the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease;

‘tis music to the sinner’s ears, ‘tis life, and health, and peace.

4 He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free;

His blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me.

5 He speaks; and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive;

The mournful, broken hearts rejoice; the humble poor believe.

6 See all your sins on Jesus laid; the lamb of God was slain;

His soul was once an offering made that all may heaven gain.

7 In Christ, our Head, you then shall know, shall see your sins forgiven,

Anticipate your heaven below, and own that love is heaven.

Prayer: Lord of all, in reverence and humility, awe and wonder, we worship you. Meet with us now and be with us always.

We step aside from the busy routine of our lives – a few moments away from our daily activities and humdrum concerns and are thankful for an opportunity to bring them quietly and prayerfully before you, and to place them in your hands.

We hold ourselves before you, Lord, with our strengths and our weaknesses, our faith and our doubts, our hopes and our fears.

We hold before you our families, our friends and our neighbours – all those we love, those we know – and those people we simply pass in the street.

We hold before you our community, our town, our country and our world – places near and far, whether integral to our lives or far removed from our experience.

In quiet confidence we entrust all to your care, knowing that your love is more powerful and your power more loving than we can ever know or imagine.

Lord of all, we want to worship you, holding before you ourselves, our loved ones – bringing all that we say and do and are.

Meet with us now and be with us always. Amen

Merciful God, we love you but we know that we do often fail you in the things we have done – or not done, and yet you still accept us.

We know we do not always worship you or serve you as we should, nor do we always obey your command and call – and yet still you care.

We have created you in our own image, forsaking you for our own interests, losing sight of your kingdom – and yet we still have a place in your purpose. We have not always loved you with heart and soul and mind, or loved our brothers and sisters in Christ – we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves – and yet *you still love us*. Even though we have not taken up our cross to follow Christ – even though there are times when we have denied your Spirit freedom to move within us – even though we have sinned against you and others in thought and word and deed – yet you still call us your children.

Merciful God – forgive us, cleanse us, restore and renew us. Assure us once more of your forgiveness, for we are truly sorry. Send us out in newness of life to live and work to your glory.

For your unfailing pardon, we thank you, Lord.

In the name of Christ we pray. **Amen**

Isaiah 55: 1-9 using The Living Bible [paraphrased version]:

This is the blessing I have given you says the Lord.] Say there! Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink – even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine and milk – it's all free! Why spend your money on foodstuffs that don't give you strength? Why pay for groceries that don't do you any good? Listen, and I'll tell you where to get good food that fattens up the soul!

Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, for the life of your soul is at stake. I am ready to make an everlasting covenant with you, to give you all the unfailing mercies and love that I had for King David. He proved my power by conquering foreign nations. You will also command the nations and they will come running to obey – not because of your own power or virtue but because I, the Lord your God, have glorified you.

Seek the Lord while you can find him. Call upon him now while he is near. Let men cast off their wicked deeds; let them banish from their minds the very thought of doing wrong! Let them turn to the Lord that he may have mercy upon them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon! This plan of mine is not what you would work out, neither are my thoughts the same as yours! For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than yours, and my thoughts than yours.

Comment: This passage is from an anonymous poet prophet, exiled to Babylon in the sixth century BC, and whose release had come in 539BC with the victory of the Persian King Cyrus. The author was probably inspired by the cries of the water-sellers and food merchants in the market to produce an image of plenty for the new life that God was giving the Israelites now their exile was over. They would still have felt disorientated so he gives them a glimpse of a thrilling future. This passage is lyrical, joyful and full of assurance. At the heart of this is the picture of God's extravagant invitation to the banquet. There is no cost – all are welcome. Running parallel to that is the theme of forgiveness. There are still those who are trying to *buy* the food and wine, although they can see and smell the fine riches that are spread out on God's banqueting table. It is almost as if they are afraid to believe in the generosity of God. They seem to think there must be some sort of catch. Isaiah assures all that there is no catch – the invitation is for all God's people – and through them to the rest of the world. All who ask for his mercy will receive it. The only step is to accept God as he is and to trust in him. They – and we – need to turn to God in repentance and hope.

Luke 13: 1-9 – a version written by Katie Thompson: Some of the people told Jesus about the Galileans who had been killed by Pilate while offering sacrifices to God.

Jesus said to them: ‘Just because they were killed does not mean that they were worse sinners than anyone else. Think of the eighteen people in Siloam who died when the tower fell on them. Do you think that proves that they were guiltier than anyone else in Jerusalem? Indeed, it does not! And I tell you that you will all come to the same end unless you turn away from your sins.’

Then he told them a parable:

A man went to check how many fruits were growing on a fig tree in his vineyard, but he found there were none. So he sent for his gardener and told him, “This tree has grown no fruit for the last three years. Cut it down and make space for another.” But the gardener said to him; “Master, give the tree one more year so I have time to feed and care for it. If it still has no fruit on it, then cut it down.”

Comment: To understand this parable of the fig tree, there are things we should know. Firstly, of course, all parables are about us and the way we live – the second is to understand how important the fig tree was – and is – in the Promised Land. In many ways the fig tree was the most popular tree. In Deuteronomy 8:8 we read that the promised Land was ‘a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees, of pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.’ When the Old Testament wanted to describe peaceful times and prosperity it would often be of someone sitting under his own vine and fig tree [1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10]. The fig tree was used as a symbol for the covenant between Israel and God [as in 1 Kings 4:25 for example] – and lack of fruit was a symbol of a lapse in faithfulness [Jeremiah 5:17; 8:13; 24:8-10].

The fig tree is a lovely tree. It is not particularly tall being about 15 to 20 feet high, but its branches spread wide, providing good shelter and shade. Jesus had seen Nathaniel under the shade of a fig tree. But the tree was valued for far more than just the shade it provided – it was valued for its fruit and it could provide two crops a year. The first crop comes off the old wood in June and the second off the new wood in September. A fig tree takes about three years to reach maturity; if it hasn’t shown signs of fruiting by then, it probably is never going to do so. Obviously, an owner expects to get fruit from his fig trees so if it doesn’t produce fruit, it doesn’t fulfil its purpose. It is just taking up room – feeding off the land while giving nothing in return. In the parable, the tree is given another chance, but if it doesn’t respond then the day of reckoning will come.

The fig tree in the parable was all promise and no performance. It would have had leaves – possibly even flowers – but no fruit – and producing fruit was the main purpose. Giving shade was all very well but nowhere near enough on its own. It was useless – and that invites disaster. All things should have a purpose – and that includes us. The church is not only a place of shelter, we have to produce the fruits of the Spirit.

It is no good our saying we are Christian if it does not show in the way we live. Thank God for the second chance – we are still here for another year, loved and cared for as was the vine by the gardener. But we need to heed the words of Jesus to repent: we are to turn around and bring forth fruit.

Meditation of a convert and apostle; [Nick Fawcett – Common Worship Year C Miscellany]:

What would you have done, had it been you – had you come to that fig tree you’d planted and found, yet again, no sign of fruit on it, nothing to justify the time and expense spent on its cultivation? Would you have waited another year – given it one last chance to blossom despite your disappointment – or would you have abandoned it as a bad job and ordered it to be dug up to make room for a better specimen; one more likely to reward your investment?

Remember, this wasn’t a first-year planting – it should have been yielding a plentiful harvest years back, and the likelihood is that no fruit one year means no fruit the next – what reason to expect any change?

Only, of course, it wasn't finally a fig tree Jesus was talking about here – it was you and me, people like us, and the harvest we produce in our lives – or, at least, the harvest we're meant to produce. Sadly, it's all too often a different story – despite the care and attention God has lavished on us, the patient preparation and dedicated nurture, there's precious little to show for it. No harvest worthy of the name.

Why bother with us any further? What reason to expect any sentiment from God, any chance to atone for past failures? None at all. And yet.....don't despair, for, while we shouldn't take it for granted, the wonderful thing is this:

Year after year Jesus goes on asking we be given one more chance – and year after year, God continues to grant that request.

The words to 'Father, I place into your hands' written by Jenny Hewer [b. 1945] Singing the Faith 519

1 Father, I place into your hands the things I cannot do.

Father, I place into your hands the times that I've been through.

Father, I place into your hands the way that I should go,

For I know I always can trust you.

2 Father, I place into your hands my friends and family.

Father, I place into your hands the things that trouble me.

Father, I place into your hands the person I would be,

For I know I always can trust you.

3 Father, we love to see your face, we love to hear your voice.

Father, we love to sing your praise and in your name rejoice.

Father, we love to walk with you and in your presence rest,

For we know we always can trust you.

4 Father, I want to be with you and do the things you do.;

Father, I want to speak the words that you are speaking too.

Father, I want to love the ones that you will draw to you,

For I know that I am one with you.

Prayers: Father, we lean on your love as we pray for your church, both collectively and as a mixed bag of individuals with needs, disappointments and fears.

We lean on your wisdom as we pray for local, national and international leaders who are subject to many pressures and conflicting values.

We lean on your affectionate understanding as we pray for our homes, and for all the homes in our area – all with their expectations and misunderstandings, their security and their insecurity.

Father, we lean on your compassion as we pray for all who are hurting in body, mind or spirit.

We lean on your faithfulness as we pray for those who have died, and those who mourn.

We lean on your accepting love as we pray in thankfulness for all you are doing in our lives, and all you have in mind for us in the future.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen**

A cry from the heart prayer: written by Pete Townsend.

Lord, I have gone through every emotion in the dictionary. I've shouted till my throat hurts. My head aches with the thoughts of senseless violence, of mindless actions that have robbed people of their hopes, their dreams, their lives. I can't pretend to understand or find an answer to the jigsaw of events that froze a moment in time for ever.

Tears sometimes say more than mere words can express. A cry from the heart speaks more wisdom than a thousand wise men. But all I can say is I don't understand, Lord. All I can pray is that somehow, for all involved in sorrow or fear, you would bring peace and understanding – while I place my life in your hands. Keep me safe and keep me willing to hear your voice and your heart.

Further Comment on the passage from Luke: The first part of this passage has Jesus answering people who were asking him questions. Perhaps they were 'winding him up' or perhaps they really wanted to know why disasters happened. They gave recent examples: Pilate, they said, had murdered people at the time animals were sacrificed to God. Eighteen people were crushed to death by the fall of the tower they were building as part of Pilate's aqueduct. They probably expected Jesus to say that those who were killed [or their parent or grandparent] had sinned and this was God's punishment. Jesus made it clear to them that the people who had been killed were no more sinful than anyone else. But, he warned, we do all need to repent of the things we have done which have disappointed God.

Many people blame God for disasters – either the big disasters or the ones which fall in our own lives. They say they can't believe in a God that lets such things happen. But calamity – whether global or personal – is no respecter of persons.

Jesus did not say why tyrants seem to prosper or why towers fall. Suicide bombings and murder are not God's doing; neither is illness and disease. It is easy always to blame someone or something when disaster hits. – but as Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* [written following the death of his son] suggests: "The God I believe in doesn't send us the problem; he gives us the strength to cope with the problem'.

The words to 'As the deer pants for the water' written by Martin J. Nystrom [b. 1956] StF 544

1 As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you.

You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship you.

You alone are my strength, my shield; to you alone may my spirit yield;

You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship you.

2 I want you more than gold or silver, only you can satisfy.

You alone are the real joy-giver and the apple of my eye.

You alone are my strength.....

3 You're my friend and you are my brother, even though you are a king.

I love you more than any other, so much more than anything.

You alone are my strength.....

Closing Prayer and Blessing: God our heavenly Father, we thank you for all the good things that you give us. Help us to listen more closely to you. Help us to understand that our ways are not your ways and our thoughts not your thoughts. **Amen**

Go in the love of God: offer God's generosity to all you meet; be generous to others as God is generous to you.

May God the Father bless us.

May God the Son be deep within us.

May God the Holy Spirit guide us and give us life. **Amen**